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SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM IN KIVUS FACES SERIOUS CHALLENGES

REF: KINSHASA 1044

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11. (SBU) Summary: Journalists and local radio media outlets in the Kivus told visiting assistant public affairs officer (APAO) they continue to receive threats, and they suspect harassment will continue in the lead-up to the 2011 local elections. The unclear future of Radio Okapi, coupled with continued resource constraints for local press agencies, compound the difficulties for media outlets in the Kivus. End summary.

Threats, harassment in Bukavu continue

12. (SBU) Threats and harassment in Bukavu continue despite recent assurances by Communications Minister Lambert Mende to donors that the Government of Democratic Republic of Congo (GDRC) was committed to preserving the security of the Congolese press (see reftel). During meetings with APAO in Bukavu on December 8-9, journalists from local media outlets Radio Mandeleo, Radio Maria, and Radio Kaoza (which broadcasts Voice of America in South Kivu) indicated that journalists continue to fear for their safety. Radio Mandeleo journalists often receive death threats from anonymous callers. The Congolese Union of Press Journalists (UNPC), of which most Bukavu journalists are members, has encouraged journalists to follow specific security precautions when walking at night. They are also establishing a "safe house" for journalists to use if they are required to work into the evening. According to Bukavu journalists, UNPC efforts to engage the South Kivu authorities have produced meager results. Radio Maria (which is run by the Catholic Church in Bukavu) bureau chiefs speculated that the murders of a Catholic priest and two nuns in the past week were aimed at Radio Maria, which had transmitted critical reports of the Kimia II operations. Most journalists believed the harassment and threats would continue until the upcoming 2011 local and national elections, so as to minimize critical reporting of political actors.

13. (SBU) A further complication is the clear indication of impunity for those accused of killing journalists. Radio Mandeleo journalists opined that the limited judicial review of the cases of slain Radio Okapi journalists Serge Mahesha and Didace Namujimbo (killed in Bukavu in 2008) reflect an inability by the GDRC provincial authorities to prosecute these cases. In the case of Mahesha, the primary suspect supposedly "disappeared" while being detained at a local police facility. As one journalist noted, "If the Government cannot try suspects, how can they actually protect journalists?"

Other challenges, some with dangerous consequences

14. (SBU) Despite the dangerous environment, the Bukavu media continue to face financial constraints. While Radio Madeleo is supported by donors, other radio stations operate on a limited budget to maintain their offices and equipment. In addition, annual taxes imposed on media outlets by the provincial government (which can often be as high as \$30,000 annually) impose financial duress on media outlets. As a result, many agencies rely on financial backing from political actors, who often use the media as mouthpieces to promote their political agenda and generate popularity.

15. (SBU) One potentially harmful consequence of political backing is hateful messages directed at specific ethnic groups to garner popular support. Goma and Bukavu representatives of the human rights group Journalists in Danger (JED) and the Network of Eastern Congo Radio and Television Outlets (RATECO) highlighted at least three cases since October of community radio stations in the Kivus (at the instruction of political leaders) broadcasting anti-Rwandaphone rhetoric to generate popular support. In Butembo, JED called upon the media station to cease its broadcasts. While initially successful, the broadcast has intermittently broadcasted anti-Rwandaphone messages.

Press safer in Goma, but same constraints apply

16. (SBU) Unlike press representatives in Bukavu, Goma journalists operate in a more secure environment. Journalists in both cities gave two reasons for this difference. First, press in Bukavu tends to be more openly critical than press in Goma. Bukavu has historically been the center of the intelligentsia in the Kivus

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while the press in Goma was heavily censored during the RCD's presence in Goma in the late 1990s. As a result, Bukavu media outlets are more accustomed to open and critical reporting. Second, journalists argue the provincial government in North Kivu affords more protection to journalists than in South Kivu (although some Goma journalists still criticize the provisional government's ability to maintain that protection).

17. (SBU) Nevertheless, journalists in Goma still face the same financial challenges as their counterparts in Bukavu. Provincial taxes and fees burden many of the local media outlets. Representatives from the GDRC-supported Congolese National Radio and Television (RTNC) asserted that even the Congolese government has failed to provide the Goma station with the necessary resources to continue regular broadcasts.

Okapi's future impacts press outlook in east

18. (SBU) Radio Okapi Bukavu bureau chief Florian Barbey and MONUC Public Information Officer Jacqueline Chenard informed APAO on December 8 that while Okapi may not be the most popular radio outlet in the Kivus, it is considered the most credible, offering local media organizations in the Kivus a model for independent journalism.

However, Okapi's future is uncertain, as its existence is tied to the presence of MONUC. This concern, coupled with concerns about the security of journalists, raises the possibility that Okapi's role in the Kivus will be marginalized.

19. (SBU) Barbey indicated that a number of alternative models are being discussed to continue Okapi's operations in eastern Congo if MONUC draws down. One is to transfer oversight and equipment to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) or RTNC. The latter option would potentially impact Okapi's integrity, given RTNC's affiliation to the GDRC. Another option is to maintain the antennas in the Kivus, and continue regional broadcasting from a remote location outside the region. In this scenario, however, Barbey admitted Okapi's product would suffer without logistical support currently provided by MONUC. More importantly, the lack of a MONUC

presence would undoubtedly leave journalists exposed.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: While press freedom is a concern throughout the DRC, Bukavu is particularly affected, and remains a dangerous environment for an independent press. The questionable future of Radio Okapi does not bode well for improvements in conditions for the region's media. As we look to assist in the development of the Kivus and facilitate the resolution of ongoing conflicts, the international community cannot ignore the needs of the press in eastern Congo. We will continue to work with donors and the GDRC to coordinate efforts to support an independent media in the Kivus.
End comment.

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